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AUTHOR Britt, Gena Covell
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated children's use of religion in coping with everyday stressful situations, and the role played by religious involvement. A parent-report questionnaire assessed children's religious involvement. Interviews with 76 fourth- and fifth-graders first identified a recently-experienced daily hassle, and then assessed the child's appraisal of the stressor, and the coping strategies each child used. Coping through mechanisms of religion was correlated with religious involvement, threat appraisals, and the coping strategies of social support and positive reappraisal. In addition, multiple regression revealed a predictive relationship between religious involvement and coping through religious faith. Contains 14 references. (WP)

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Children's Coping with Everyday Stressful Situations: The Role Played by Religion

Gena Covell Britt

Virginia Commonwealth University

Poster presented at the 61st Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Indianapolis, Indiana, March 30-April 2, 1995.

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Abstract

Investigated children's use of religion in coping with everyday stressful situations, and the role played by religious involvement in this process. A parent-report questionnaire assessed religious involvement. Interviews with 76 fourth and fifth graders first identified a recently-experienced daily hassle, and then assessed 1) the child's appraisal of the stressor and 2) the coping strategies each child used. Religious coping was correlated with religious involvement, threat appraisals, and the coping strategies of social support and positive reappraisal. In addition, multiple regression revealed a predictive relationship between religious involvement and religious coping.

Background

In recent years, research on children's coping behavior has multiplied. Children's use of religion in coping, however has received little attention. Do children use their faith to help them cope? What role does religious involvement play in the coping process? It is likely that religious involvement influences both a child's appraisal of a situation (how threatening it is, how much control they have over it) as well as the types of coping efforts they employ.

Research has suggested that at least some adults use religion to cope with stressful situations (Carver et al., 1989; Folkman, et al., 1986; Mattlin et al., 1990; McCrae, 1984; McCrae and Costa, 1986; Pargament et al., 1988; Pargament et al., 1990; Pargament et al., 1992; Stone and Neale, 1984). Although no research has specifically addressed how children might use religion in coping, some studies have incorporated religious items on their coping scales (Curry and Russ; 1985; Band and Weisz, 1988; Sharrer and Ryan-Wenger, 1991). Results of this research suggest that, at least for some children, religion may be used as a coping strategy.

Hypotheses

1. The less control a child felt over the cause and outcome of the stressor, the more likely religion would be used as a coping strategy.

2. Appraising a stressor as high in threat would be associated with using religious coping.

3. Appraising a stressor as caused by God would be associated with using religion as a coping strategy.

4. Those with high involvement in religious activities would demonstrate higher use of religious coping compared to those with a low religious involvement.

5. Use of religious coping would be related to using social support and positive reappraisal.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 76 (39 boys and 37 girls) fourth and fifth grade students recruited from three private (one Catholic, one Baptist, one non-affiliated) schools. Demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Measures

The Religious Activities Questionnaire (RAQ) assessed the child's religious activities via parent report. Dimensions assessed on the RAQ included importance of religion, frequency of involvement in religious activities, and parental involvement in religious activities.

The Stress and Coping Interview consisted of 1) identifying a stressful event which had recently been experienced by the child, using a modified version of the Children's Hassles Scale (Kanner et al., 1985); 2) assessing the child's appraisal of the stressor in terms of how threatening the child perceived it to be and how much control he or she felt over the cause and the outcome, using a set of questions developed by Kliewer (personal communication) with the addition of a few questions for the purpose of this study; and 3) the child rating the extent to which he or she engaged in a list of coping strategies using a modified version of a questionnaire developed by Ayers (1991).

Procedure

Parents. Packets were sent to parents with a letter explaining the study, a consent form, a demographic questionnaire, and a Religious Activities Questionnaire (RAQ). Parents who agreed to participate signed the consent form, and completed the demographic questionnaire and RAQ.

Children. Children of parents who agreed to participate were interviewed individually during school hours with the stress and coping interview. After establishing rapport and obtaining verbal consent, the interview consisted of randomly choosing a hassle for further discussion from a list of "somewhat" or "very" upsetting hassles the child had identified as occurring during the past 30 days. The child was then asked questions regarding how he or she appraised the stressful situation. Lastly, the child rated a list of coping strategies on a four-point scale in terms of the extent to which they used each one.

Results

The mean religious coping score was 2.3 on a four-point scale, indicating that children did endorse using religion as a coping strategy.

Relation Between Appraisals and Religious Coping

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to evaluate the first three hypotheses regarding the relationship between appraisals and religious coping. As Table 2 illustrates, the only significant relationship was between religious coping and appraising a situation as being high in threat.

Relation Between Religious Involvement and Religious Coping

Religious coping was significantly correlated with all religious involvement dimensions (see Table 3). Multiple regression revealed a predictive relationship between religious coping and both overall religious involvement and parental involvement, supporting hypothesis four (see Table 4).

Relation Between Coping Variables

Significant relationships were found between religious coping and emotion-focused support ($r = .36$, $p < .001$), problem-focused support ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), and positive cognitive restructuring ($r = .35$, $p < .01$), supporting hypothesis five.

Discussion

Results indicate that some children do use their faith to cope with everyday stressful situations, and that (parent-reported) religious involvement is positively related to children's use of religion as a coping strategy. These findings are encouraging for parents who are trying to instill a reliance on God in their children through involvement in religious activities.

Other findings showed that the more threatening children appraised a situation to be, the more likely they were to use religion to cope. In addition, a positive relationship was revealed between the using religious coping and using the strategies of social support and positive reappraisal.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic	N	%
SEX		
Male	39	51.3
Female	37	48.7
ETHNICITY		
White	66	86.8
Black	7	9.2
Other	4	4.0
RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION		
Catholic	23	29.9
Baptist	16	20.8
Protestant (non-Baptist)	26	33.8
Other	11	14.2
Atheist	1	1.3

	M	SD	Range
AGE (years)	10.7	0.64	9.4-12.1
HOLLINGSHEAD	48.5	12.25	26.0-66.0

Table 2

Correlations between Religious Coping and Appraisals of Threat and Control

Type of Appraisal	Pearson's r
Threat	.32**
Control of Cause	-.08
Control of Outcome	.18*
God Causing	-.01

*p < .10
**p < .01

Table 3

Correlations between Religious Coping and Religious Involvement

Type Religious Involvement	Pearson's r
Importance (importance of religion to parent, child, family)	.37*
External Activities (going to church or participating in other religious activities, such as choir)	.28*
Internal Activities (praying or bible reading)	.30*
Parental Involvement (Going to church with child, praying with child)	.42**

*$p < .01$
**$p < .001$

Table 4

Regression of Religious Coping onto Religious Involvement

R Squared: .21

Predictors	Beta
Importance	.20
External Activities	-.05
Internal Activities	.05
Parental Involvement	.33*

Overall $F(4,69) = 4.58$, $p < .003$.

*$p < .03$.

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